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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [MOPS](#) [KPKO](#) [ET](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA/ERITREA: UNMEE OFFICE HEAD SAYS
REGROUPING GOING WELL

REF: 08 ADDIS ABABA 117

Classified By: Amb. Donald Yamamoto. Reason: 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY. On February 26, United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) Head of Addis Ababa Office Joseph Stephanides told visiting Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) POLAD and PolOff that UNMEE's relocation to Asmara was going well and that UNMEE was in no danger of running out of food. Stephanides speculated that in his personal opinion Eritrean President Isaias would let UNMEE leave as long as it did not redeploy to Ethiopia. He also advocated the dissolution of UNMEE and that the UN should establish a new observer mission to be placed on the Ethiopian side of the border. Stephanides assessed that the Ethiopian government was not looking for war, and he disclosed that the Japanese government was looking to play a role in mediating the Ethiopian-Eritrean impasse. Lastly, he said the Russian DCM to Ethiopia told him that the Ethiopian government was attempting to establish an Eritrean government in exile from the Eritrean opposition that could be used to justify Ethiopian military action against the Isaias government. END SUMMARY.

UNMEE'S "REGROUPING" GOING WELL, FOOD SITUATION OVERBLOWN

12. (C) Stephanides opened by reporting that UNMEE's relocation to Asmara was going well and that all UNMEE personnel would be in the city by the end of February. He noted that the Secretary General would be issuing a report on the situation within days. When queried, Stephanides said UNMEE was in no danger of running out of food, but that the UN had exaggerated the issue in order to pressure the Eritrean Government. He stated that Asmara was refusing permission for UNMEE's contractor to distribute the food to UNMEE team sites, but that UNMEE itself had now taken over food transportation from Massawa to Asmara. He added that President Isaias had made no attempt to starve the force.

"ISAIAS WILL LET UNMEE LEAVE"

13. (C) Stephanides speculated that in his personal opinion Isaias was "too smart" to hold UNMEE. He said UNMEE probably

would be forced to leave through its initial entry points at Asmara Airport, Massawa, and Assab. Stephanides opined that Isaias was surprised by UNMEE's attempt to rapidly relocate to Ethiopia and that Isaias was concerned that the United States was trying to "get UNMEE out of the way" so that Ethiopia could attack Eritrea.

ADVOCATES DISSOLVING UNMEE, STARTING OVER

14. (C) On the issue of where to go next, Stephanides said that in his view the UN should "clear the deck" and start over with a new mission, new mandate, and new staff. He asserted that the current UNMEE staff was not configured for what should now be a monitoring mission on the Ethiopian side of the border and that new actors would allow Isaias to re-engage. He said that the infantry battalions were unnecessary in Ethiopia and that the current force commander was incompetent and that relocating him to Ethiopia would not solve the problem. He emphasized that the new force should be staffed primarily from countries who could provide highly trained "literate" officers capable of performing military intelligence tasks.

15. (C) However, Stephanides cautioned that careful work would be required to convince the Ethiopians to accept such a force. He was adamant that the Ethiopians would never accept a force that looked like it was deployed to monitor the Ethiopian military. He also said Ethiopian Chief of Defense Staff General Samora would reject a force that occupied fixed positions or was a hindrance or imposition to the military.

ADDIS ABAB 00000506 002 OF 002

SPECULATES ETHIOPIA NOT LOOKING FOR WAR

16. (C) Stephanides assessed that in his personal opinion the Ethiopian government was not looking for war and that taking military action was "more useful as an option than in exercise." He insisted that Ethiopia would act if they believed it was in their interest, but that they were not motivated to attack Eritrea. He suggested that the United States should help reinforce Ethiopia's no war policy.

JAPAN LOOKING FOR BORDER ROLE

17. (C) Stephanides confided that the Japanese government was quietly looking for a diplomatic role on the border issue. He said the Japanese government had approached him seeking an opportunity to put forward a Japanese official as some type of special envoy if the political conditions improved to the point where such an arrangement might show promise.

ETHIOPIA LOOKING TO STAND-UP ERITREAN GOVERNMENT IN EXILE

18. (C) Lastly, Stephanides disclosed that the Russian DCM to Ethiopia, who he said often exceeded Moscow's instructions, told Stephanides that the Ethiopian government was attempting to set up an Eritrean government in exile with the Eritrean opposition. The Russian told Stephanides that once established, the government in exile could openly call for Ethiopian assistance and give Ethiopia international justification for removing Eritrean President Isaias. (Note: A counselor at the Russian Embassy here separately told Embassy officers the same thing.)

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Post concurs that work will have to be done to sell a reconfigured or new UN mission to the Ethiopian government that would sit only on the Ethiopian side of the border. As Post has previously reported (REF), Prime Minister Meles sees little utility in UNMEE once it departs Eritrea.

¶10. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED. Post has regular contact with the Eritrean opposition groups and there is little secret that the opposition hopes to establish an organization capable of serving as an interim government in the event the Isaias government falls, but we have no information to corroborate the assertion that the Ethiopian government intends to use the opposition as justification to remove Isaias. Eritrean opposition members have repeatedly told Embassy officers that Ethiopian support for the opposition risks severely undermining the opposition's legitimacy in the eyes of the Eritrean people. END COMMENT.
YAMAMOTO